

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5968

INFO AMEMBASSY MEXICO

AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

AMEMBASSY PANAMA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 SAN JOSE 0218

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, CS

SUBJECT: COSTA RICAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN STAYS COOL
WITH TWO WEEKS TO GO

REF: SAN JOSE 4134 (DTD 11/23/73)

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: THE COSTA RICAN PUBLIC CONTINUES TO VIEW THE FEBRUARY 3 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS WITH AN UNUSUAL DEGREE OF EQUANIMITY AND LACK OF EXCITEMENT. PARTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RELATIVE PLACIDITY IN THIS LATE STAGE OF THE CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN THE RELUCTANCE OF SECOND RUNNING CANDIDATE DR. FERNANDO TREJOS TO GO FOR LEADER DANIEL ODUBER'S JUGULAR, ALTHOUGH ODUBER'S ADEPTNESS IN FIELDING THE EASYGOING TREJOS' FEEBLE BARBS HAS HAD ITS EFFECT AS WELL. FORCEFUL MEASURES ADOPTED BY THE SUPREME ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL TO PREVENT RIVAL PARTIES FROM EMPLOYING EXTRA-LEGAL TACTICS TO INFLAME THE ELECTORATE HAVE ALSO SERVED TO KEEP PASSIONS MUTED. THE SUM TOTAL OF THESE FACTORS MAY WORK TO ODUBER'S
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ADVANTAGE, SINCE ONLY IN AN AROUSED STATE IS

IT LIKELY THAT THE OPPOSITION RYD NTL-COMMITTED
VOTERS WOULD TURN OUT IN SUFFICIENT NUMBERS TO
PREVENT THE PLN CANDIDATE FROM WINNING A
40-PERCENT PLURALITY ON THE FIRST BALLOT. END SUMMARY.

2. WITH LITTLE MORE THAN TWO WEEKS TO THE ELECTIONS,
NEITHER OF THE TWO PRINCIPAL PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES,
DANIEL ODUBER (PLN) NOR DR. FERNANDO TREJOS (UN),
HAS SUCCEEDED IN EXCITING A LARGE PART OF THE
ELECTORATE. THE VOTERS' CONTINUED FASCINATION BY
THE CAMPAIGN ANTICS OF MAVERICK, MINOR CANDIDATE
G.W. VILLALOBOS-- THE LATEST BEING HIS SUCCESSFUL
TELEVISED, RING CHALLENGE OF CENTRAL AMERICAN
PROFESSIONAL LIGHTWEIGHT WRESTLING CHAMPION
"THE VULTURE" TESTIFIES TO THE RELATIVE INDIFFERENCE TO
THE UNEMOTIVE SPARRING BETWEEN THE MAIN
CONTENDERS. ALTHOUGH ODUBER'S POSITION AS FRONTRUNNER
REMAINS UNCHALLENGED THERE IS STILL SOME QUESTION AS TO HIS
ABILITY TO ATTAIN THE REQUIRED 40-PERCENT PLURALITY TO
ZLN THE PRESIDENCY ON THE FIRST BALLOT. THE PLN
CANDIDATE WTILL FAILS TO STIR THE LARGE CROWDS HIS
WELL-OILED ORGANIZATION TURNS OUT FOR THIS RALLIES,
BUT OF COURSE THE FULL WEIGHT OF THE LARGE PLN MACHINE
HAS NOT YET BEEN BROUGHT TO BEAR.

3. ODUBER'S PRINCIPAL CONTENDER, TREJOS, HAS BEEN
WARMLY RECEIVED IN HIS SOMEWHAT LESS FREQUENT
PUBLIC APPEARANCES, BUT HAS NOT MOVED VIGOROUSLY TO
EXPLOIT TWO TOUGH ISSUES--INFLATION AND CORRUPTION
IN THE INCUMBENT PLN ADMINISTRATION--THAT WOULD FAVOR
HIS CAUSE, AND WHICH HE HAS STATED PRIVATELY ARE HIS
BEST BETS. THE TWO OTHER IMPORTANT CANDIDATES,
JORGE GONZALEZ MARTEN (PNI) AND RODRIGO CARAZO (PRD),RH
CONTINUE TO SHOW STRENGTH IN ATTRACTING ENTHUSIASTICS

(ALTHOUGH NOT TUNULTUOUS) CROWDS. NEITHER, HOWEVER,
REMOTELY THREATENS TREJOS FOR THE NO. 2 SPOT.

4. SINCE THE FIRST OF THE YEAR, ODUBER'S PROPAGANDA
HAS IMPROVED CONSIDERABLY. HIS EARLIENJTURGID
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MEDIA PRONOUNCEMENTS DETAILING THE PLN PLATFORM
AD NAUSEUM HAVE BEEN LARGELY SCRAPPED IN FAVOR OF
MORE UPBEAT APPEALS BOOSTING THE CANDIDATE HIMSELF,
AND INDICATION THAT ODUBER HAS FINALLY BEGUN TO LISTEN
TO THE PLEAS OF HIS AMERICAN CAMPAIGN PUBLICIST.
ODUBER'S PROPAGANDA ALSO NOW SEEKS TO INCITE THE
STILL LARGELY LISTLESS ELECTORATE WITH A NOT VERY
CONVINCING PITCH THAT THIS YEAR'S ELECTION IS A

MOMENTOUS EVENT THAT WILL CRITICALLY AFFECT THE FUTURE OF COSTA RICA. AS HIS NEW LINE GOES, COSTA RICA, FACED WITH THE WORLD ENERGY AND FOOD CRISES AND THE SPECTOR OF CHILEAN-STYLE CHAOS, NEEDS A MAN OF EXPERIENCE AND PROVEN ABILITY TO LEAD THE COUNTRY THROUGH. AND ONLY "ODUBER HAS ALL THAT IS NECESSARY TO GOVERN."

T. ODUBER'S CAMP HAS ALSO SHOWN ITSELF FAIRLY NIMBLE IN RESPONDING TO OR PREEMPTING THE TWO POTENTIALLY MOST DANGEROUS CHARGES IN THE OPPOSITION'S ARSENAL: THAT THE INCUMBENT ADMINISTRATION HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RAPID RISE IN THE COST OF LIVING AND PARTICULARLY, FROM GONZALEZ MARTEN, THAT ODUBER IS SOFT ON COMMUNISM. ODUBER HAS SOUGHT WITH SOME SUCCESS TO FINESSE THE INFLATION CHARGE BY PLACING THE BLAME ON UNCONTROLLABLE INTERNATIONAL FACTORS. HIS OWN EXPLANATIONS HAVE BEEN ABETTED BY OSTENSIBLY UNRELATED MEDIA ADS LIBERALLY PLACED BY GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS WHICH PURPORT TO DEMONSTRATE STATISTICALLY THAT COSTA RICA, THANKS TO AN ABLE PLN ADMINISTRATION, HAS SUFFERED LESS INFLATION THAN ITS CENTRAL AMERICAN NEIGHBORS.

6. ODUBER RETAINS BITTER MEMORIES OF HIS RAZOR-THIN 1966 DEFEAT WHICH WAS IN LARGE PART A RESULT OF PERSISTENT OPPOSITION CHARGES THAT HE WAS SOFT ON COMMUNISM. THIS YEAR HE HAS SOUGHT NOT ONLY TO PREVENT THE SAME ISSUE BEING USED AGAINST HIM AGAIN, BUT ALSO TO MAKE THE ELECTORATE'S FEAR OF COMMUNIST PENETRATION IN COSTA RICA WORK FOR HIM. HIS CAMPAIGN MESSAGE PRESCRIBES A PLN GOVERNMENT AS THE BEST "VACCINATION" AGAINST THE COMMUNIST MENACE BECAUSE HIS PARTY OFFERS THE BEST PROGRAMS TO ERASE THE VERY CONDITIONS THAT

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BREED COMMUNISM.

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R 191332Z JAN 74

FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
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7 DESPITE HOPES THAT THE COMMUNIST MENACE ISSUE WAS WELL IN HAND, THE ISSANCE OF A MANIFESTO BY THE COSTA RICAN CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS IN EARLY JANUARY, WARNING THE FAITHFUL NOT TO BE SEDUCED BY EITHER MARXIST SOCIALISM OR LAISSEZ-FAIRE CAPITALISM, THREEW A MOMENTARY SCARE INTO THE ODUBER CAMP. TO FORESTALL THE OPPOSITION FROM PORTRAYING THE MANIFESTO AS A SLIGHTLY DISGUISED CHURCH ATTACK ON HIMSELF, ODUBER RAPIDLY ENDORSED THE CLEARICS' POSITION AS HIS WON, ARGUING THAT THEIR "NEITHER COMMUNISM NOR CAPITALISM", EXHORTATIONS DOVETAILED PERFECTLY WITH THE PLN PLATFORM.

8. ODUBER'S EFFORTS TO DEFUSE THE OPPOSITION'S MOST TELLING CHARGES AGAINST HIM HAVE BEEN GREATLY ASSISTED BY THE DISINCLINATION OF DR. TREJOS TO WADE IN AND MIX IT UP WITH HIM IN THE CAMPAIGN. STRIDENT ATTACKS AGAINST ODUBER BY GONZALEZ MARTEN AND CARAZO HAVE SIMPLY NOT BEEN GIVEN SUFFICIENT WEIGHT BY THE ELECTORATE TO SERIOUSLY HURT ODUBER. SEEMINGLY, TO BE BELIEVED, THE DHARGES WOULD HAVE TO COME FROM
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TREJOS HIMSELF, GENERALLY REGARDED AS THE MOST HONEST OF OPPOSITION CANDIDATES AS WELL AS THE STRONGEST CHALLENGER. BUT DR. TREJOS, SKITTISH ABOUT SEEING A LITTLE BLOOD ON THE FLOOR, HAS NEVER, FOR EXAMPLE, VOLUNTEERED TO STUDY DETAILS THAT WOULD GIVE SUBSTANCE TO HIS CHARGES OF CORRUPTION AND BAD ADMINISTRATION IN THE PLN GOVERNMENT, EVEN THOUGH THE UN CAMP HAS AMPLE EVIDENCE AT ITS CANDIDATE'S DISPOSAL. AS A CONSEQUENCE, TREJOS HAS FORFIETED HIS STRONGEST CARD,

LEAVING ODUBER FREE, FOR THE MOST PART, TO IGNORE THE ATTACKS WITHOUT SUFFERING SERIOUS HARM. ACCORDING TO FRUSTRATED UN INSIDERS, THE EASYGOING AND AFFABLE TREJOS IS DETERMINED TO FOLLOW A "HIGH-LEVEL" CAMPAIGN AND RECENTLY ORDERED HIS PUBLICISTS TO DEVOTE THE BULK OF THEIR EFFORTS TO BOLSTERING HIS OWN IMAGE RATHER THAN PUSHING STRONG ATTACKS ON ODUBER'S CHARACTER.

9. ASIDE FROM TREJOS' DEMONSTRATED LACK OF THE JUGULAR INSTINCT, MANY OBSERVERS CREDIT THE RELATIVE TRANQUILITY OF THIS CAMPAIGN TO THE NO-NONSENSE ATTITUDE TAKEN BY THE SUPREME ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL (TSE), WHICH IS CONSTITUTIONALLY THE SOLE JUDGE, ARBITOR, AND SUPERVISOR OF THE ENTIRE ELECTORAL PROCESS. IN A SERIES OF RECENT DECISIONS BASED ON A REGOROUS INTERPRETATION OF THE ELECTORAL CODE, THE TSE HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT IT WILL BROOK CAMPAIGN EXCESSES BY NO PARTY. AMONG ITS MORE SIGNIFICANT RULINGS THE TSE HAS:

A. PROHIBITED POLITICAL DEMONSTRATIONS OF ANY KIND ON AVENIDA CENTRAL, SAN JOSE'S PRINCIPAL THOROUGHFARE, TO PUT A STOP TO NIGHTLY BRAWLING THE FLAG-WAVING ROWDIES OF OPPOSING PARTIES. THESE ENCOUNTERS, PRECIPITATED BY ATTEMPTS BY RIVAL PARTISANS TO ESTABLISH A "KING OF THE HILL" STYLE DOMAIN OVER THE AVENUE'S STREET CORNERS TO FLAUNT THEIR PARTIES' FLAGS, HAD FOR YEARS BEEN A PRE-ELECTION PASSTIME;

B. ORDERED AN OSTENSIBLY PRIVATE CITIZEN, EDWIN RETANA CHAVEZ, TO SUSPEND HIS SYSTEMATICS AND DAMAGING NEWS MEDIA CAMPAIGN AGAINST DR. TREJOS WHICH ALLEGED THAT THE UN CANDIDATE HAD SOLD OUT CONFIDENTIAL
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THE LOWER CLASS CALDERONISTA VOTERS, WHO FORM THE BULK OF HIS PARTY, TO CONSERVATIVE FINANCIAL INTERESTS. THE TSE RULING, BASED ON AN ELECTORAL CODE RESTRICTION OF ELECTORAL PROPAGANDA TO INSCRIBED POLITICAL PARTIES, TRIGGERED A HOSTILE BUT FUTILE EDITORIAL REACTION BY THE THREE MAJOR SAN JOSE DAILIES, WHO CLAIMED THAT IT VIOLATED THE CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEE OF FREE EXPRESSION. (THE EMBASSY UNDERSTANDS THAT RETANA, WHO IS IN FACT A GONZALEZ MARTEN SUPPORTER, HAD MOUNTED HIS COSTLY CAMPAIGN--COLONES 50,000 SO FAR--AS A QUID PRO QUO FOR THE PLN HAVING ARRANGED THE PURCHASE OF A TOTAL OF COLONES GTPNPPP OF PNI BONDS TO KEEP GONZALEZ MARTEN IN THE RACE. THE ATTACKS STOOD TO BENEFIT BOTH ODUBER, SINCE THEY WEAKENED HIS MOST IMPORTANT OPPONENT, AND GONZALEZ MARTEN, WHO DRAWS MUCH OF HIS SUPPORT FROM DISENCHANTED CALDERONISTAS.)

C. PROHIBITED THE PLN FROM DISTRIBUTING A PAMPHLET THAT SUGGESTED THAT THE OSTENSIBLY DEVOUT CARAZO HAS BEEN FEIGNING HIS CATHOLICISM FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES.

D. PROHIBITED BONZALEZ MARTIN FROM PUBLISHING PROPAGANDA PROTRAYING ODUBER AS SYMPATHETIC TO MARXISM. (THE PNI LEADER HAD ATTEMPTED TO PROFIT FROM THE BISHOPS' RECENT AFCI-MARXIST MANIFESTO.) INH DMOUBSEQUENT, RELATED RULING, TSE WENT EVEN FURTHER AND BANNED ANY PARTY FROM USING THE QUALIFIERS "COMMUNIST" OR "MARXIST" IN ITS PROPAGANDA WHEN REFERRING TO CANDIDATES OR PROGRAMS OF RIVAL PARTIES.

10. IN ADDITION TO RESTRAINTS IMPOSED BY THE TSE, THE NEWS MEDIAJS FEAR OF LEGAL PROSECUTION FOR LIBEL BY THE OFFENDED PARTY HAS ALSO PUT A DAMPENER ON THE DISSEMINATION OF SCURRILOUS CAMPAIGN MATERIAL. LA NACION, LOSER OF SEVERAL LIBEL SUITS IN THE RECENT PAST, HAS TURNED DOWN PAID POLITICAL ADS IT CONSIDERED OFFENSIVE. RUMORS ABOUT ABERRANT BEHAVIOR OF THE CANDIDATES IN THEIR PRIVATE LIVES, FOR EXAMPLE, DO NOT OFTEN MAKE THE PRESS IN COSTA RICA.

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11. TO DATE, PRESIDENT FIGUERES HAS KEPT HIMSELF REMARKABLY DETACHED FROM THE CAMPAIGN. HIS MOTIVES ARE NOT CLEAR, BUT EXPLANATIONS HAVE RANGED FROM HIS ALLEGED UNENTHUSIASM FOR ODUBER TO HIS DESIRE TO STRIKE A STATESMANLIKE STANCE FAR REMOVED FROM THE PEDESTRIAN HULLABALOO OF THE CAMPAIGN. THE LATTER IS SUGGESTED BY THE FACT THAT AS LATE AS HIS TELEVISION ADDRESS ON JANUARY 16, FIGUERES CONFINED HIMSELF TO A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF THE INCREASE IN OIL PRICES ON COSTA RICA INSTEAD OF WEIGHING IN ON BEHALF OF ODUBER. ANOTHER POSSIBLE EXPLANATION IS THAT HE AND ODUBER REALIZE THAT HIS ACTIVE INTERVENTION ON BEHALF OF ODUBER WOULD NOT ONLY CONSTITUTE A CLEAR VIOLATION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROHIBITIONS AGAINST A PRESIDENT'S INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY WOULD SERVE TO RAISE PASSIONS IN THE CAMPAIGN TO A LEVEL THAT COULD WORK AGAINST THE PLN CANDIDATE.

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12. TO SUM UP, THE FACTORS DISCUSSED ABOVE HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO A SENSE OF RELATIVE SERENITY IN THE CAMPAIGN WHICH, IF UNINTERRUPTED, COULD WORK TO THE ADVANTAGE OF ODUBER. FOR UNLESS THE OPPOSITION CANDIDATES INDIVIDUALLY OR IN CONCERT SUCCEED IN STIRRING THE ELECTORATE, PARTICULARLY THE NON-COMMITTED VOTERS, TO TURN OUT HEAVILY AGAINST THE PLN, AND OFFSET THE LARGE PLN MACHINE VOTE WHICH WILL BE DELIVERED FOR ODUBER, HE WILL LIKELY WIN THE REQUIRED 40-PERCENT PLURALITY ON THE FIRST BALLOT.
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